



Oren Hanner (ed.)

# Buddhism and Scepticism

Historical, Philosophical,  
and Comparative Perspectives



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## Contents

Foreword by the Editors	7
Contributors	9
Acknowledgements	13
Introduction	15
<i>Oren Hanner</i>	
Some Sceptical Doubts about “Buddhist Scepticism”	21
<i>Mark Siderits</i>	
Beyond Reasonable Doubt? A Note on Dharmakīrti and Scepticism	37
<i>Vincent Eltschinger</i>	
Nāgārjuna’s Scepticism about Philosophy	55
<i>Ethan Mills</i>	
Yavanayāna: Buddhist Soteriology in the Aristocles Passage	83
<i>Georgios T. Halkias</i>	
The Evident and the Non-Evident: Buddhism through the Lens of Pyrrhonism	109
<i>Adrian Kuzminski</i>	
Scripture and Scepticism in Vasubandhu’s Exegetical Method	131
<i>Oren Hanner</i>	
Sceptical Buddhism as Provenance and Project	161
<i>James Mark Shields</i>	
Index	179

# Nāgārjuna's Scepticism about Philosophy

Ethan Mills

*The pacification of all cognitive grasping and  
the pacification of conceptual proliferation are peace.  
Nowhere, to no one has any dharma at all been  
taught by the Buddha.*  
– Nāgārjuna, Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, 25.24

Nāgārjuna (c. 200 CE) is usually regarded as the founder of the Madhyamaka school of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, and he has likely been one of the most variably interpreted philosophers in history. In the hands of interpreters in India, Tibet, East Asia, and the West, Nāgārjuna has been read as a nihilist, a mystic, an anti-realist, a transcendental metaphysician, a deconstructionist, an irrationalist, an empiricist, a philosophical deflationist, a philosopher of openness, and a sceptic.<sup>1</sup>

The root of much of these interpretive disputes is the fact that Nāgārjuna's texts appear to contain two mutually incompatible tendencies. Let us call

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<sup>1</sup> See Wood (1994) for a contemporary defense of a nihilist interpretation (which was influential in classical India); Burton (2002) for a reading that Nāgārjuna's philosophy entails nihilism despite his non-nihilist intentions; Arnold (2005) for a transcendental interpretation of Nāgārjuna's commentator Candrakīrti; Magliola (1984) for an appropriately playful Derridian deconstructive reading; Huntington (2007) for an irrationalist reading with a postmodern flavour; and Kalupahana (1986) for an empiricist reading in which Nāgārjuna debunks the metaphysical excesses of philosophers following the death of the Buddha. Mystical readings see the negative arguments as preparation for ineffable mystical insight (see Abe, 1983, Murti, 1955, and Taber, 1998), while anti-realist readings take Nāgārjuna's point to be that "we cannot give content to the metaphysical realist's notion of a mind-independent reality with a nature (whether expressible or inexpressible) that can be mirrored in cognition" (Siderits, 2000, p. 24; see also Siderits, 2007, and Westerhoff, 2010). Versions of sceptical readings that differ from my own can be found in Garfield (2002), Matilal (1986), and Kuzminski (2008). A recent interpretation of Nāgārjuna as a philosophical deflationist can be found in Gandolfo (2016); an interpretation that makes much of metaphors of openness is McGagney (1997). For a general introduction to Madhyamaka, see Williams (1989), chapter 3, and for a detailed history of Madhyamaka in India, see Ruegg (1981).

these positive and negative tendencies. On one hand, Nāgārjuna seems to be presenting positive philosophical arguments in favour of the thesis that all things are empty of essence, the thesis of universal emptiness. Consider, for instance, this frequently discussed verse from the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (hereafter *MMK*): “That which is dependent origination, and that which is designated based on having grasped something, that we call emptiness and the middle path itself” (*MMK* 24.18).<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, there are negative passages in which Nāgārjuna seems to encourage readers to eschew *any* thesis whatsoever, perhaps even a thesis of universal emptiness. For example, the *MMK* ends with this famous yet puzzling verse: “I bow to him, Gautama, who, by means of compassion, taught the true *dharma* for the purpose of abandoning all views” (*MMK* 27.30).<sup>3</sup> How can Nāgārjuna simultaneously argue in favour of a positive view that all things are empty while also encouraging the negative abandonment of all views? Does one of these tendencies take priority over the other? Does Nāgārjuna contradict himself, and if so, does he do so intentionally? Does Nāgārjuna mean just what he says, or should some of his statements be taken non-literally? What is the point of his philosophical procedure?

My goal is to offer a sceptical interpretation that offers coherent answers to these questions. My thesis is that Nāgārjuna is best seen as a sceptic about philosophy. Rather than seeking to put forward a philosophical view about the nature of reality or knowledge, Nāgārjuna uses arguments for emptiness to purge Madhyamaka Buddhists of any view, thesis, or theory whatsoever, even views about emptiness itself.

Elsewhere, I have defended this interpretation against others, especially mystical and anti-realist interpretations.<sup>4</sup> Here, I shall instead argue in favour of my sceptical interpretation by illustrating its hermeneutic virtues, particularly how it makes sense of the fact that Nāgārjuna employs two seemingly incompatible tendencies. I will make a case study of Nāgārjuna’s discussion

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<sup>2</sup> *yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe /*

*sā prajñaptir upādāya pratīpat saiva madhyamā //* (*MMK* 24.18). This single verse has spawned a cottage industry among Nāgārjuna scholars. A good place to start is Berger (2010). Translations from Sanskrit are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> *sarvadṛṣṭiprahāṇāya yaḥ saddharmam adeśayat /*  
*anukampām upādāya taṁ namasyāmi gautamam //* (*MMK* 27.30)

<sup>4</sup> See Mills (2013, 2016, 2018b).

of causation in chapter 1 of the *MMK*. Lastly, I will turn to historical issues: first, Nāgārjuna develops the quietist strands of Early Buddhism while incorporating elements of analysis-insight strands, and second, there are historical precedents for sceptical interpretations of Nāgārjuna in India, Tibet, and China. Inquiry into Nāgārjuna's historical and religious context shows that for him, Buddhism and scepticism are not merely compatible in the way that Sextus Empiricus claims Pyrrhonism is compatible with religious practice. Buddhist practice of at least one type actually *constitutes* a type of scepticism, a point that can contribute to larger conversations about scepticism and religious practice.

### Scepticism about Philosophy

As I use it, “scepticism about philosophy” constitutes a diverse cross-cultural club of philosophers who use philosophical methods against philosophy itself, which distinguishes them from sceptics whose objects are domains such as knowledge of the external world, other minds, induction, and so on. Scepticism about philosophy is most fully exemplified in Western philosophy by Sextus Empiricus, in China by Zhuangzi, and perhaps in Abrahamic traditions by al-Ghazali, Maimonides, and Montaigne. The Indian tradition contains hints of such scepticism in the *R̥g Veda*, *Upaniṣads*, and Early Buddhism, but scepticism about philosophy reached its peak in the “three pillars” of Nāgārjuna, Jayarāśi, and Śrīharṣa.<sup>1</sup> While this rather motley cross-cultural crew of sceptics operates within different intellectual contexts and often engages in scepticism for different reasons, I think there is enough similarity in their sceptical attitude about philosophy to warrant gathering them together into a loosely affiliated philosophical coalition.

Since I am claiming that Nāgārjuna is sceptical about philosophy, it is natural to wonder what, exactly, I am claiming he is sceptical about. The difficulty in answering this question comes from the fact that sceptics about philosophy tend to define “philosophy” dialectically based on their opponents' views. Sceptics about philosophy neither need nor desire to put forward a theory about what philosophy really is.

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<sup>1</sup> I am borrowing the “three pillars” metaphor from Eli Franco: “From almost complete oblivion he [Jayarāśi] slowly emerges as one of the three pillars on which Indian scepticism rests, the other two being the much more famous Nāgārjuna and Śrīharṣa” (Franco, 1994, p. 13).

As an example of this parasitic method of defining the target of scepticism about philosophy, consider Sextus Empiricus. Sextus tells us that he relies on the Stoics' idea that philosophy consists of three parts:

The Stoics and some others say that there are three parts of philosophy—logic, physics, ethics—and they begin their exposition with logic [...]. We follow them without holding an opinion on the matter. (*Outlines of Scepticism* [PH] 2.2)

Sextus says that Pyrrhonists do not have their own opinions about what philosophy is for the simple reason that Pyrrhonism is not about putting forward and defending positions on philosophical matters such as the true nature of philosophy; rather, Pyrrhonism is an ability to reach equipollence between opposing views, which leads to the suspension of judgement and a feeling of tranquillity (PH 1.4).<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, Nāgārjuna is working purely dialectically with metaphysical and epistemological definitions from opponents such as Ābhidharmikas and Naiyāyikas, because his ultimate goal is not the elucidation of another philosophical doctrine, but rather the “pacification of conceptual proliferation” (*prapañcopaśama*). Thus, the target of Nāgārjuna's scepticism is defined by his opponents.

## Nāgārjuna's Two Phases

According to my interpretation, Nāgārjuna has two general phases in his philosophical procedure, corresponding to the positive and negative kinds of statements I identified earlier. The first phase is that of offering arguments for emptiness and against essence (*svabhāva*). The second phase is that of demonstrating that this idea of emptiness has the peculiar property of undermining not only all other philosophical views, but even itself, thus leaving a thorough Mādhyamika without any views, theses, or positions whatsoever. This second phase is the purging of philosophical impulses, the end of philosophy itself. In other words, Nāgārjuna is a sceptic about philosophy.

Nāgārjuna's texts are not a steady march from phase one to phase two. His texts are complex and move freely between these phases. Still, a general tendency to move towards the second phase can be detected in the *MMK* from

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<sup>2</sup> There may be evidence of direct historical interaction between Pyrrhonism and Madhyamaka, but I will not consider such evidence here (see Beckwith, 2015, and McEvelley, 2002).



the fact that the verses most amenable to phase two are found in the dedication (*mangalam*), at the end of several chapters, and especially at the end of the text.<sup>3</sup>

This interpretation opens Nāgārjuna up to the objection that it is self-refuting or at least logically inconsistent to claim that one is making no claim. This is a time-honoured objection that goes as far back as the *Nyāya Sūtra* (probably roughly contemporaneous with Nāgārjuna himself).<sup>4</sup> Is such a claim self-refuting? How can one have a claim and a non-claim at the same time without violating the Law of Non-Contradiction? Here, an analogy with Pyrrhonism can help. According to Harald Thorsrud, the charge of inconsistency is a category mistake: “Just as it is neither consistent nor inconsistent to ride a bicycle, the practice of scepticism, in so far as it is something the sceptic *does*, can be neither consistent nor inconsistent” (Thorsrud, 2009, p. 146). Likewise, Nāgārjuna's texts are part of a philosophical practice with a therapeutic rather than theoretical goal. While phase one looks like a philosophical language game of giving reasons for positions, in phase two, Nāgārjuna is simply playing a different game.

The most obvious advantage of my interpretation is that it can account for the presence of both positive and negative kinds of statements. It sometimes seems as if Nāgārjuna is offering straightforward arguments for emptiness because he *is* giving straightforward arguments for emptiness, and it sometimes seems as if Nāgārjuna is rejecting all philosophical views because he *is* rejecting all philosophical views. Granted, my interpretation places a greater emphasis on phase two, but this phase is reached through arguments for emptiness. In other words, phase one is the medicine one must take in order to reach phase two, as suggested by *MMK* 13.8: “The antidote to all views is proclaimed by the conquerors to be emptiness. Those who have a view of emptiness the conquerors called incurable.” To insist on taking emptiness as a view is to remain in phase one. In his commentary on this verse, Candrakīrti quotes a *sūtra* in which emptiness is compared to a medicine that must purge itself from the body once it has cured the intended illness (*Prasannapadā* [PP], pp. 208–209). *MMK* 13.8 and its commentary should

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<sup>3</sup> The end of chapter verses are 5.8, 13.8, 25.24, and 27.30. Other verses suggestive of phase two are 18.5, 21.17, and 24.7.

<sup>4</sup> See *Nyāya Sūtra* 2.1.12–13, in which a Madhyamaka-style argument against *pramāṇas* is considered and rejected as self-contradictory. For a thorough study of this section of the *Nyāya Sūtra* and its relation to the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, see Oetke (1991). The charge of self-refutation is also the first objection Khedrupje makes against his sceptical opponent (mKhas-grub dge-legs-dpal-bzang-po, 1992, p. 258).

be taken to mean that even though one might vigorously argue for emptiness in phase one, in phase two, emptiness, like a purgative drug, should remove itself along with all other philosophical views.<sup>5</sup>

Most philosophers are accustomed to residency in something like phase one. We put forward arguments, refute other arguments, and so forth. But what is it like to inhabit phase two? This phase is described beautifully by *MMK* 25.24: “The pacification of all cognitive grasping and the pacification of conceptual proliferation are peace. Nowhere, to no one has any *dharma* at all been taught by the Buddha.”<sup>6</sup> Candrakīrti’s commentary explains that

that which is the pacification, or cessation, of all bases of conceptual proliferation, that is *nirvāṇa*. [...] Also, pacification of conceptual proliferation, because there is non-activity of words, is peace, because of the non-functioning of thought. (*PP*, p. 236)<sup>7</sup>

This pacification of grasping and “conceptual proliferation” (*prapañca*) is about as extreme an end to philosophical speculation as I can imagine; it is hard to imagine that any philosophical theory could be an option for a person in this state. It may seem odd to claim that the pacification of conceptual proliferation constitutes *nirvāṇa*, but notice that Candrakīrti says that it is only when *all* bases of conceptual proliferation have ceased that *nirvāṇa* is

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<sup>5</sup> Anti-realist interpreters may object by pointing to Candrakīrti’s other famous metaphor in this section: that of the person who says “Give to me, then, that same ware called ‘nothing’” (*PP*, p. 208). In anti-realist terms, this means that emptiness is not an object or being. However, regarding anti-realism as a theory about what does *not* exist could be construed as a subtle form of grasping at being; namely, grasping at the being of a theory that tells us that certain things do not really exist. The problem is not with the content of anti-realism in that it inclines towards a nihilistic theory; rather, in phase two, the problem is that anti-realism is a theory at all.

<sup>6</sup> Erich Frauwallner has translated 25.24 as “All perception ceases, the diversity is appeased, and peace prevails. Nowhere has the Buddha proclaimed any doctrine to anyone” (Frauwallner, 1958/2010, p. 211). This relies on translating *prapañca* as “diversity,” which is, I think, the sense of the word in some Brahmanical contexts (such as Gauḍapāda’s *Āgama Śāstra*), but it ignores the Buddhist context in which *prapañca* has a more psychological sense of “conceptual proliferation.” Also, Frauwallner sees 25.24 as “one of the germs of the later doctrine that sees in the phenomenal world a creation of cognition” (Frauwallner, 1958/2010, p. 186). I do not think that this works, however, since *prapañca* does not have the idealist sense that the mind in some sense actually creates reality, but simply the psychological sense that the mind grasps at concepts.

<sup>7</sup> *sarveśāṃ prapañcānāṃ nimittānāṃ ya upaśamo ’pravṛttis tān nirvāṇam. [...] vācām apravṛtter vā prapañcōpaśamaś cittasyāpravṛtteḥ śivāḥ* (*PP*, p. 236).

reached. In the meantime, lessening one's attachments to views, concepts, and thoughts is a good thing for a Buddhist to do.<sup>8</sup>

The notion of the "pacification of conceptual proliferation" (*prapañcōpaśama*) is vital to my interpretation. *Prapañca* comes from the root  $\sqrt{pac}$  or  $\sqrt{pañc}$  and has the primary meanings of "expansion, development, manifestation." In philosophy, it is said to mean "the expansion of the universe, the visible world." In other contexts, it could even mean "deceit, trick, fraud, error" (Monier-Williams, 1995, p. 681). In Nāgārjuna's context, however, we need to take into account the specific Buddhist history of this word: *prapañca* comes from the Pāli *papañca*, which is "very hard to define." It has been rendered into Tibetan as a word that means "spreading out, enlargement" and "activity" and into Chinese as a word meaning "frivolous talk" or "falsehood. [...] The freedom from *prapañca* is always praised" and the word is "closely associated with *vikalpa*, and the contexts suggest *vain fancy, false imagining*" (Edgerton, 2004, pp. 380–381). In discussing the Nikāyas, Steven Collins points out that "*papañcā* are said to have ideas (or perception) as their cause; the 'root of imaginings and estimations' is said to be the idea 'I am the thinker' [...] an idea described as an 'internal craving'" (Collins, 1982, p. 141). For Madhyamaka, this idea came to be closely associated with language. According to Paul Williams, "'*prapañca*' in the Madhyamaka seems to indicate firstly the utterance itself, secondly the process of reasoning and entertaining involved in any articulation, and thirdly further utterances which result from this process" (Williams, 1980, p. 32).

The pacification (*upaśama*)<sup>9</sup> of *prapañca* is the goal of phase two. However radical phase two might be, it seems unlikely that a person in this phase would be worried about philosophical theories, which rely a great deal on

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<sup>8</sup> It may also be that Candrakīrti's enthusiasm has inclined him to read more into the verse than is necessary. Perhaps Nāgārjuna did not mean that one should stop thinking altogether, but simply that one will find peace when one stops *grasping* at cognitions and concepts. Also, it may be that *nirvāṇa* is not as otherworldly as it is often taken to be. As the contemporary Thai monk Buddhādāsa, who often strives to make Buddhism a more practical, down-to-Earth matter, puts it, "in Dhamma language, *nibbāna* is the complete and utter extinction of *dukkha* right here and now" (Buddhādāsa, 1988, p. 26).

<sup>9</sup> I prefer "pacification" for *upaśama* in this context instead of "cessation," because the root  $\sqrt{śam}$  means not only "cessation," but also "to become tired [...] be quiet or calm or satisfied or contented" (Monier-Williams, 1995, p. 1053). Also, the Sanskrit etymology resonates nicely with the Latin root of "pacification," which is *pax* (peace). More importantly,  $\sqrt{śam}$  is the root for *śamatha* (tranquility), which is the Sanskrit name for one of the forms of meditation recognized by Buddhists, the other being *vipaśyanā* (insight). This latter connotation may have been obvious to Nāgārjuna's Buddhist readers.

*prapañca*: the expansion of concepts and language. *Prapañca* also has a negative affective dimension involving unnecessary and harmful attachments to concepts and utterances. In this sense, the Buddha did not teach any *dharma*, because he did not mean to put forward a theory; he meant to cure us of the disease of wanting to put forward theories. In phase one, a person might be convinced that all beings really are empty; in phase two, one ceases to even ask the question of whether beings are empty, much less to grasp at one answer. Interpretations that depict Nāgārjuna as implying or making claims that there either is or is not some ultimate reality entirely miss the point. The point is to stop longing for either non-conceptual or conceptual access to ultimate reality or even for conceptual construction of theories that claim that there are no absolutes. The point is to stop trying to give a general theory of anything, even a theory of universal emptiness. The point is to stop philosophizing. Thus, when Nāgārjuna denies having a view (*drṣṭi*) or thesis (*pratijñā*), he does not intend us to qualify these statements. He has no views. Full stop.

What is the link between these two phases? The clue comes in the penultimate verse of the *MMK*: “And thus, due to the emptiness of all beings, in regard to what, for whom, of what things at all, will views, concerning eternity and so forth, be possible?” (*MMK* 27.29).<sup>10</sup> This expresses the emptiness of emptiness. The idea is that if emptiness is accepted as a philosophical theory in phase one, then there ceases to be anything for a philosophical theory about emptiness to be about, a need for a person to have such a theory, or any basis for such a theory.<sup>11</sup>

One might object that the “and so forth” (*ādayaḥ*) after “eternity” (*śāśvata*) is meant only to add “nihilism” (*ucchedavāda*) to the list of views that emptiness makes impossible; perhaps a view of the middle way is safe. However, this route is blocked by the last verse: “I bow to him, Gautama, who, by means of compassion, taught the true *dharma* for the purpose of

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<sup>10</sup> *atha vā sarvabhāvānām śūnyatvāc chāśvatādayaḥ /  
kva kasya katamāḥ sambhaviṣyanti drṣṭayaḥ // (MMK 27.29)*

<sup>11</sup> I also think that the thesis of universal emptiness is self-undermining, because it simultaneously must be universal and cannot be universal on account of its emptiness (see Mills, 2016). I also agree with Garfield and Priest (2002) that it is contradictory to assert that the essence of all things is that they lack essence, although rather than committing Nāgārjuna to some variety of paraconsistent logical theory, I see this as the means by which the view of emptiness cancels itself out. After using emptiness to demonstrate the internal incoherence of other theories, Nāgārjuna hopes that readers will see that emptiness itself is internally incoherent and ought to be relinquished along with all other theories as the final target of *prasaṅgic* unravelling.

abandoning all views" (*MMK* 27.30).<sup>12</sup> Here, *dharma* should be taken in the sense of teaching a sceptical technique rather than in the sense of a philosophical view or truth-claim as in 25.24.

There is, of course, a long-standing debate about whether "all views" (*sarvadṛṣṭi*) here means all views whatsoever, or all *false* views, as is commonly interpreted by many Indian, Tibetan, and Western commentators.<sup>13</sup> I think we should take Nāgārjuna at his word.<sup>14</sup> While I cannot resolve this centuries-long dispute here, I will say that a strength of my interpretation is that we can take Nāgārjuna seriously in both phases; we need not ignore or downplay the significance of either. By taking Nāgārjuna as a sceptic about philosophy, we can see a certain unity in his philosophy while taking both positive and negative statements seriously.

### The Cause of Scepticism: The Critique of Causation

Let me turn to one specific area: the critique of theories of causation. My interpretation can make sense of why Nāgārjuna offered such deep criticisms of this area of central philosophical concern. His intention is not to offer some alternative to other philosophers' theories about causation, but rather to uproot the impulse to engage in any such theorization at all.

I will concentrate on the first chapter of the *MMK*. This chapter begins with one of the most famous verses of the text:

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<sup>12</sup> *sarvadṛṣṭiprahāṇāya yaḥ saddharmam adeśayat /*

*anukampām upādāya taṃ namasyāmi gautamaṃ // (MMK 27.30)*

<sup>13</sup> Proponents of the "false views" translation note that *dṛṣṭi* often has a negative connotation of "a wrong view" (Monier-Williams, 1995, p. 492). While it is possible that Nāgārjuna meant "wrong views," it is also possible that he meant views in general. The same Sanskrit word is used for the element of the Eightfold Path known as "right view" (*samyag-dṛṣṭi*), which has a positive connotation in most contexts. In any case, an appeal to the text cannot solve this debate. My point is that if we want to take "*dṛṣṭi*" as meaning all views, it is possible to do so in a way that makes sense of the text. In favour of my translation, however, I would point out that a major reason in support of the "false views" translation—that the text cannot make sense otherwise—is simply not the case.

<sup>14</sup> In this, I agree with Garfield in his agreement with Ngog and the Nying-ma school (Garfield, 2002, pp. 46–68). Later, I will discuss Patsab as well as the opponent of Khedrupje in the *Great Digest* as others who take *MMK* 27.30 at face value. Fuller (2005) is a thorough study of *diṭṭhi* (the Pāli equivalent of *dṛṣṭi*) in early Buddhism.

Not from itself, nor even from another, nor from both, nor even from no cause, are any arisen beings found anywhere at all. (*MMK* 1.1)<sup>15</sup>

The first thing to notice is that this is an example of a *catuṣkoṭi* or tetralemma in which four options are given; in this *catuṣkoṭi*, all four options are denied. There is extensive contemporary scholarship on the logical issues of the tetralemma,<sup>16</sup> but these issues are beyond my concerns here.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *na svato nāpi parato na dvābhyāṃ nāpy ahetutaḥ /*

*utpannā jātu vidyante bhāvāḥ kva cana ke cana //* (*MMK* 1.1)

<sup>16</sup> Some contemporary sources that discuss logical aspects of the *catuṣkoṭi* are Chakravarti (1980), Galloway (1989), Garfield and Priest (2002), Robinson (1957), Ruegg (1977), and Westerhoff (2006, 2009, chapter 4). Ruegg (1977, pp. 39–52) gives a summary of work on the issue from the 1930s until the early 1970s.

<sup>17</sup> The logical issues arise when one understands a negative *catuṣkoṭi* as follows:

~P

~~P

~ (P & ~P)

~~(P v ~P)

(In *MMK* 1.1, “P” would be “the cause arises from itself.”) If this is interpreted according to straightforward propositional logic, it would seem that denying both option one and option two at the same time violates the Law of Non-Contradiction, since “~~P” is (by the rule of Double Negation Elimination) equivalent to “P” and then you would have “~P & P.” There are also positive versions of the *catuṣkoṭi* (e.g., *MMK* 18.8) in which option four is “~(P v ~P),” which violates the Law of Excluded Middle. A third major issue is that the third and fourth options are not logically distinct: applying De Morgan’s Theorem to option four of the positive *catuṣkoṭi* (“~[P v ~P]”) turns it into “~P & ~P,” which (via Double Negation Elimination) is logically equivalent to the third option (“[P & ~P]”). Chakravarti (1980), Ruegg (1977), and Westerhoff (2006) bring in the *prasajya-paryudāsa* distinction. They take the negations of each option of the negative *catuṣkoṭi* as *prasajya* negations that do not accept the opponents’ presuppositions (such as the existence of *svabhāva*). Westerhoff also points out that Nāgārjuna means to use a *prasajya* negation of both a proposition and its *paryudāsa* negation, which means that there is no violation of the Principles of Non-Contradiction or Excluded Middle any more than there is in saying “the number seven is neither green nor not green” or “unicorns are neither brown nor not brown.” Westerhoff and Chakravarti also bring in the idea of “illocutionary negation” in which the negation has a performative aspect of refusing to engage in a practice such as promising or asserting (Chakravarti, 1980, p. 305; Westerhoff, 2006, p. 379). Westerhoff sees this as a “more general notion” than *prasajya* negation, since it also includes cases such as recognition of a lack of evidence to either assert or deny a statement; he then interprets the fourth option of the *catuṣkoṭi* to mean that Nāgārjuna does not assert either P or ~P, which makes it logically distinct from the third option (Westerhoff, 2006, pp. 379–380). I am more sympathetic to Chakravarti, who sees all four negations as illocutionary negations. This may make options three and four logically equivalent at the end of the day, but only if illocutionary negations are within the purview of Double Negation Elimination, which they may not be. In any case, Nāgārjuna’s point seems to be more that his opponents might *think* they are separate options. Westerhoff raises the concern that illocutionary negations make it seem that Nāgārjuna

The second option is clearly the view held by the Abhidharma schools.<sup>18</sup> According to Abhidharma, there are four *pratyayas*, or “conditions.” This includes aspects of what Aristotle would call an “efficient cause,” but also other factors that are conditions for something taking place. Nāgārjuna lists them as follows:

There are thus only four kinds of conditions (*pratyayas*): material cause (*hetu*), object of a cognition (*ālambana*), immediately preceding cause (*anantara*), and dominant cause (*ādhipateya*). There is no fifth kind of condition. (*MMK* 1.2)<sup>19</sup>

The *pratyayas* can be explained through examples. The material cause (*hetu*) of a sprout is a seed. The sprout would in turn be a cause of, say, a mango tree, which is a material cause of a mango. An object of a cognition (*ālambana*) would be the taste that one might cognize when biting into a piece of mango. An immediately preceding cause (*anantara*) is the state of affairs right before an event, such as a piece of mango reaching one's tongue. A dominant cause (*ādhipateya*) is what gets the whole process going and gives it its purpose, such as one's decision to eat a mango in order to enjoy its tastiness.<sup>20</sup> Nāgārjuna argues against each of these *pratyayas*.

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is ultimately uncommitted to the truth or falsity of statements concerning the existence of *svabhāva* and answers that “we want to assert a negative proposition when speaking *about* the proposition concerned” (Westerhoff, 2006, p. 381). I am not so sure; while Nāgārjuna makes assertions in phase one, such assertions are ultimately a means towards ceasing to make any assertions in phase two. I would suggest that even statements about universal emptiness are not, at the end of the day, straightforward assertions of negative propositions, although that is how they appear; I see Nāgārjuna's statements in phase one as provisional statements that are ultimately taken back in phase two.

Garfield and Priest (2002) claim that some of Nāgārjuna's statements should be interpreted as embracing true contradictions and that Nāgārjuna is therefore hinting at a type of non-classical, paraconsistent logic called dialetheism. Irrationalist interpretations such as Huntington (2007) take Nāgārjuna to be purposefully denying logical principles. Concerning Garfield and Priest, we simply do not need anything as exotic as dialetheism to make sense of the *catuṣkoṭi*; a bit of care with the type of negation involved will do. I am not denying dialetheic logic, just that we need it to interpret Nāgārjuna's *catuṣkoṭis*.

<sup>18</sup> The Vaiśeṣikas and Naiyāyikas also held a version of this view.

<sup>19</sup> *catvāraḥ pratyayā hetuś cālambanam [hetur ārambaṇam] anantaram / tathāivādhipateyaṃ ca pratyayo nāsti pañcamah // (MMK 1.2)*

<sup>20</sup> For more details on the *pratyayas* and their Abhidharma pedigree, see Garfield (1995, pp. 108–109), Siderits (2007, p. 194), and Siderits and Katsura (2006, p. 135).

There is disagreement among both classical and contemporary commentators concerning the details of Nāgārjuna's argument,<sup>21</sup> but here is how I characterize it:

**Option One:** Suppose an arisen being were to arise from itself (in Indian philosophy, this view, which was held by the *Sāṃkhya* school, is called *satkāryavāda*, the view that the effect is pre-existent in the cause).<sup>22</sup> However, this cannot work, because the essence (*svabhāva*) of the effect is not found in its conditions (*pratyaṃ*) (verse 1.3ab). For instance, the light and heat of fire is not found in firewood, nor is the consistency of yoghurt found in fresh milk.

**Option Two:** Suppose an arisen being were to arise from something else (this view is called *asatkāryavāda*, the view that the effect is not present in the cause, which was the view of Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, and Abhidharma Buddhists). There are several arguments against this option:

- First, “if its own essence (*svabhāva*) is not found, then the essence of the other (*parabhāva*) is not found” (verse 1.3cd).<sup>23</sup> That

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<sup>21</sup> Siderits notes at least one difference in Buddhapālita's and Candrakīrti's interpretations of *MMK* 1.3cd in that Candrakīrti sees it as linked to verse 4 (Siderits, 2004, p. 404). Some differing contemporary summaries of the argument can be found in Garfield (1995, pp. 103–123), Hayes (1994, pp. 308–310), Siderits (2004, pp. 401–408), Taber (1998, pp. 213–222), and Westerhoff (2009, pp. 99–113). One major difference is that Garfield, unlike most other commentators, claims that Nāgārjuna draws a distinction between cause (*hetu*) and condition (*pratyaṃ*) and seeks to demonstrate the incoherence of causes, which have essences, while showing that conditions, which are empty, are philosophically acceptable as part of “Nāgārjuna's conventionalist regularism” (Garfield, 2002, p. 72; see also Garfield, 1995, pp. 103–105). Siderits points out that the claim that Nāgārjuna makes such a distinction “leads to a strained reading of *MMK* 1.4–1.5, as well as to the acute problem that he must then make *MMK* 1.11–1.13 objections” (Siderits, 2004, p. 415 n. 18). I agree with Siderits here and would also point out that *hetus* are listed as one *kind* of *pratyaṃ* and that Nāgārjuna argues against each of the four *pratyaṃ*s in *MMK* 1.7–10. I see no evidence in the text of chapter 1 for the distinction between *hetus* and *pratyaṃ*s. As Garfield admits, however, one of his reasons for drawing this distinction is to reconcile chapter 1 with the seemingly constructive view implied by the discussion of emptiness, dependent origination, and the two truths in *MMK* 24 (Garfield, 2002, p. 41).

<sup>22</sup> Westerhoff points out that there are actually two versions of option one: the first is that “cause and effect are *the very same object*” and the second, which was the *Sāṃkhya* theory, is that “the effect is *contained in*, and forms a part of, the cause” (Westerhoff, 2009, pp. 100, 103).

<sup>23</sup> *avidyamāne svabhāve parabhāvo na vidyate* (*MMK* 1.3cd). Garfield glosses this argument as follows: “The view is in fact internally contradictory. Given that things have no intrinsic nature, they are not essentially different. Given that they lack difference, they are interdependent. But given that interdependence, there cannot be the otherness needed to build otherness-essence out of dependence” (Garfield, 1995, p. 112). Siderits (2004, p. 416 n. 20) argues that this reading of the argument leaves it open to Hayes's charge that it commits the fallacy of equivocation on the words *svabhāva* and *parabhāva* such that they can mean either identity and difference or causal independence and causal dependence (Hayes, 1994, pp. 312–315). To avoid attributing this fallacy to Nāgārjuna, Siderits follows Candrakīrti in seeing verse 3cd as a set up for the



is, once you rule out the first option that the essence of the effect is found in the conditions (which means that the cause and effect have the same essence), it is not clear how the two separate essences required by the second option—the essence of the cause and that of the effect—are to be related. In the absence of any way to identify that *this* effect is an effect of *that* cause and *vice versa*, Nāgārjuna concludes that the “essence of the other” (*parabhāva*), meaning the essence of the cause given the essence of the effect and *vice versa*, is not found.

- Second, Nāgārjuna considers a possible answer to the problem raised in the previous argument: perhaps the two essences are related by a causal power (*kriyā*). “A causal power (*kriyā*) has no condition (*pratyaya*), nor does it occur without conditions” (1.4ab).<sup>24</sup> That is, the idea of a causal power is contradictory, for if you assert a causal power to explain the relation between cause and effect, you need another relation to explain the relation between the causal power and the cause itself, and so forth, and so an infinite regress ensues. Thus, there *cannot* be any such relation relating cause to effect, but there *has* to be such a relation if option two is to work.<sup>25</sup> The same problem arises if you try to say that the conditions possess a causal power (1.4cd).

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introduction of the idea of *kriyā* (activity, causal power) in verse 4 (Siderits, 2004, p. 404; 2007, p. 194). Siderits then glosses the argument of 3cd as follows: “Since the intrinsic nature of the effect is not in the conditions, it will not do to say that the effect arises from something with a distinct nature (that the cause is *parabhāva* to the effect)” (Siderits, 2004, p. 404). Siderits’s linking of 3cd to verse 4 gives Nāgārjuna a way to avoid equivocating on identity and independence, since it shows how the two senses of *svabhāva* and *parabhāva* are in fact related: these terms consistently refer to the identity of the causes and effects (however, I do not think that Siderits is correct that the argument needs to show that causation is conceptually constructed to accomplish this). Rather than relying on an equivocal conceptual link between *svabhāva* and *parabhāva*, Siderits construes the argument as raising the issue of how the cause and effect are to be related if they are separate. If the first option (the effect arises from itself) were correct, it would be easy to see how causes cause their particular effects, since the cause and effect have the same essence; however, the second option cannot answer this question unless you bring in some sort of causal connection or causal power (*kriyā*). Of course, verse 4 argues against the concept of *kriyā* as well. For an alternative attempt to avoid Hayesian fallacies, see Taber (1998).

<sup>24</sup> *kriyā na pratyayavatī nāpratyayavatī kriyā* (MMK 1.4ab).

<sup>25</sup> My reading of this argument, especially the idea that it involves an infinite regress, is inspired by Siderits and Garfield (Garfield, 1995, pp. 113–114; Siderits, 2004, pp. 405–406; 2007, pp. 194–195). Westerhoff also sees an infinite regress, but of a different kind. For him, the infinite regress is that you can always add more objects to the “causal complex” that brought about the effect (Westerhoff, 2009, pp. 105–107).

- Third, Nāgārjuna uses a version of the argument from the three times in wondering *when* the effect produces the cause.<sup>26</sup> This cannot happen *before* the effect exists, because it does not make sense to call something a cause when its effect does not yet exist: you might as well call it a *non-cause* (5cd) and non-existent objects cannot have *any* sort of cause (6c). The effect cannot produce the cause *after* the effect exists, because there is no point in causing something that already exists (6d). Perhaps there is a third time during which the effect is coming into being and thus both exists and does not exist simultaneously. But this cannot work (7ab): how can something both exist and not exist at the same time, especially if the Abhidharma theory of radical momentariness were true? If ultimately existing things (*dharmas*)<sup>27</sup> are fully existent in one moment and non-existent the next, then this third time simply cannot work.

**Option Three:** Perhaps an arisen being could arise through a combination of self-causation and from something else.<sup>28</sup> While Nāgārjuna does not deal with this option explicitly, he probably expects his audience to see that given his arguments against options one and two, a combination of the two could not possibly work either.

**Option Four:** Perhaps an arisen being arises from no cause at all.<sup>29</sup> Again, Nāgārjuna does not explicitly discuss this option, but we are

<sup>26</sup> Here, I am more-or-less following Siderits, who is in turn more-or-less following Candrakīrti in seeing the conclusion of an Argument from the Three Times in 1.7ab (Siderits, 2004, pp. 406–408; 2007, p. 195).

<sup>27</sup> In Abhidharma, the only things that ultimately exist are *dharmas*, which are impartite momentary events or tropes with essences (*svabhāva*) that do not disappear when philosophically analysed by a careful thinker. For more on *dharmas* in Abhidharma, see Siderits (2007, pp. 111–113). Goodman (2004) plausibly argues that *dharmas* (at least as they are treated in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*) are similar to the contemporary metaphysical idea of tropes, which are neither substances nor universals.

<sup>28</sup> This is probably the option taken by Jain philosophers (Sullivan, 1988, p. 91; Westerhoff, 2009, p. 109 n. 56). This makes sense because, as Westerhoff claims, “it coheres well with their multiperspectivist outlook (*anekāntavāda*) to argue that the effect is already present in the cause *qua* its potentiality (*śakti*) but not *qua* its fully developed form” (Westerhoff, 2009, p. 109 n. 56).

<sup>29</sup> Sullivan (1988, p. 91) claims that this is the Cārvāka position. Westerhoff mentions that the Nikāyas place the Cārvākas in option two, while modern commentators such as Murti and Kalupahana place the Cārvākas in option four (Westerhoff, 2009, pp. 104, 111 n. 60). I do not think either option two or option four fits the Cārvāka view presented in the *Sarvadarśanasamgraha* (*SDS*). There, Mādhava has Cārvākas consider an objection that their view leads to the variety of things in the world being causeless or without explanation (*ākasmika*). The Cārvāka answer is: “If someone were to say that (*iti cet*), this is not valid, because the arising of that [variety] is just from its nature (*svabhāvat*)” (*SDS*, p. 4). The idea that things arise from their own nature is corroborated by Cārvāka fragments found in other texts as well (Bhattacharya, 2002, p. 604). This theory sounds more like option one than option two or option four. It may be that Nāgārjuna has no specific opponent in mind in option four, but rather that

presumably supposed to grasp for ourselves that this option is either absurd because it contradicts our experience or at the very least that it will not work for any would-be causal theorist, since it gives no explanation at all for causes and conditions.

Nāgārjuna uses these arguments against the material cause (*hetu*), the object of a cognition (*ālambana*), the immediately preceding cause (*anantara*), and the dominant cause (*ādhipateya*) in verses 7, 8, 9, and 10 respectively. Verses 11 to 14 focus on similar issues concerning the effect (*phala*).

The key here is that these are all negative arguments against the causal theories of various opponents. While some contemporary scholars take Nāgārjuna's text to contain or imply a positive causal theory, particularly in light of what he later says about emptiness (e.g., in *MMK* 24), such a move is blocked by phase two. In the last two verses of the *MMK* (27.29–30), Nāgārjuna demonstrates that emptiness leads to the abandoning of all views. If Nāgārjuna means what he says, then we should take everything he says that looks like a view about emptiness as a provisional view that ought to be abandoned later.<sup>30</sup> I see the shape of Nāgārjuna's argument on causation and emptiness as follows: *MMK* 1 undermines other views about causation, *MMK* 24.18–19 develops a provisional view of emptiness, and *MMK* 27.29–30 demonstrates that this provisional view undermines itself.

I have not attempted to evaluate these arguments (which is a worthwhile task that has been taken up elsewhere<sup>31</sup>), but rather to engage with the question of what Nāgārjuna intends his arguments to do: Nāgārjuna's intention is to guide readers from the emptiness of phase one to the mental peace of phase two—the cessation of conceptual proliferation and the relinquishment of all views.<sup>32</sup>

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he presents this option as a logical possibility to be considered: a common tactic in *prasaṅga* arguments.

<sup>30</sup> See also *MMK* 13.8. Additionally, there are passages in the *Ratnāvalī* in which Nāgārjuna argues against the existence of dependent origination (e.g., 1.37, 1.65, etc.). Frauwallner translates *Ratnāvalī* 1.37 as follows: "Since it (= the dependent becoming of the cycle of existences) cannot come about from itself, from something other, and from both, and this in all three time periods, the belief in an 'I' becomes invalid and thereby deed and birth also" (Frauwallner, 1958/2010, p. 223). Frauwallner takes this to mean: "Liberation takes place [...] through recognition of the unreality of dependent origination" (Frauwallner, 1958/2010, p. 217).

<sup>31</sup> For just a few examples of more evaluative approaches, see Burton (2002), Hayes (1994), Taber (1998), and Tillemans (2007).

<sup>32</sup> I should note that similar cases can be made on other topics, such as Nāgārjuna's critique of the means of knowledge in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*. I have done so in other work (Mills, 2016).

## Buddhist Scepticism: Religiosity Without Belief

An incredulous reader may wonder how Nāgārjuna could possibly be a *Buddhist* philosopher if he is also a sceptic. It may seem that no interpretation of Nāgārjuna that has little relation to Buddhist soteriological goals of gaining knowledge of the true nature of reality could be correct. More generally, one may also wonder how he could be religious in any meaningful sense if his goal is to eschew *all* beliefs of a philosophical or religious nature. These are worthwhile objections, and I will respond to them in turn.

The first objection is that my interpretation, in which Nāgārjuna's goal is to pacify our tendency to engage in conceptualization, neglects other Buddhist goals of insight into the true nature of reality, knowledge of things as they are, and the notion of right view as one of the elements of the Eightfold Path. It might be thought that no Buddhist can be a sceptic of this sort since a Buddhist must aim at liberating knowledge. It is probably the persistence of objections such as this that makes it so difficult for many interpreters to take phase two seriously, leading such interpreters to posit various truth-claims (e.g., anti-realist conclusions, mystical apprehension, etc.) as what it is that liberated Buddhists come to know.

My response is that the two phases of Nāgārjuna's philosophical practice are representations of two tendencies that have been present in Buddhist philosophy from the beginning. As Steven Collins points out,

one approach to the attainment of the "emptiness" of *nibbāna*, naturally, was a direct assault on any form of conceptualization, any view whatsoever. [...] The other approach [...] was to proceed through an analysis of what does have conceptual content, in order to classify it into known categories; the ability to classify any experience or concept into a known, non-valued impersonal category was held to be a technique for avoiding desire for the object thus classified. (Collins, 1982, p. 113)<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Richard Hayes has identified a kind of scepticism within the Buddhist tradition from the Nikāyas up until at least Dignāga, which he calls "skeptical rationalism [...] according to which there is no knowledge aside from that which meets the test of logical consistency, and moreover very few of our beliefs meet this test" (Hayes, 1988, p. 41). Hayes also claims that Nāgārjuna exemplified this type of scepticism (Hayes, 1988, pp. 52–62). See also Mills (2018b, chapter 1), in which I discuss four examples of early Buddhist quietism: the anti-speculative attitude (e.g., *Cūḷamālunkya Sutta* and *Alagaddūpama Sutta*), the elimination of conceptual proliferation (*papañca*) (e.g., *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta*), the fact that many arguments against the self have non-

This second tendency is the more popular one in which the purpose of Buddhism is to decrease desire through insight into the true nature of reality. This tendency was developed to an unparalleled degree in the Abhidharma traditions, but its seeds are present in early Buddhism. The other tendency is what Collins calls “quietism,” which is “an attitude which emphasizes passivity in religious practice, and which seeks to attain as its final goal a state of beatific ‘inner quiet’” (Collins, 1982, p. 139). Similarly, Paul Fuller suggests that there are two main ways of understanding the role of views (*diṭṭhi*) in early Buddhism: the opposition understanding, in which right views are opposed to wrong views, and the no-view understanding, in which the goal is to avoid all views whatsoever (Fuller, 2005, p. 1).

A clear example of early Buddhist quietism can be found in the following line from the *Sutta Nipāta*: “(Only) when a man renounces all opinions, does he make no quarrel with the world” (Collins, 1982, p. 130). Consider also the famous Ten Unanswered Questions in the *Cuḷamālunkya Sutta* or the parables of the water snake and the raft in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*.<sup>34</sup> In the *Aggivaḥagotta Sutta*, the Buddha describes the cessation of conceptualization and “I-making” in terms strikingly similar to *MMK* 27.30:

Therefore, I say that because of the destruction, fading away, cessation, abandoning, and relinquishing of all conceptions, all cogitations, all predispositions of I-making, mine-making, and conceit, the *Tathāgata* is without attachment. (*MN* 1.485–86; trans. Holder, 2006, pp. 119–20)

My sceptical interpretation shows Nāgārjuna's innovation in bringing the analysis-insight and quietest strands together. Nāgārjuna transforms this uneasy dichotomy into a single dialectical practice: he aims to show that the practice of analysis, when pursued to the emptiness of emptiness, can be used as a means to the practice of pacifying conceptualization. On my interpretation, Nāgārjuna, while a reformer and innovator, is working entirely within

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dogmatic conclusions (e.g., *Mahānīdāna Sutta*), and the goal of relinquishing all views (e.g., *Aggivaḥagotta Sutta* and *Sutta Nipāta*).

<sup>34</sup> Fuller's concern is more with modern interpretations that the early Buddhist tradition has a single attitude towards views, as opposed to Collins's and my understanding that the tradition contains both attitudes. Also, Fuller argues against both the opposition and no-view understandings: “The opposition understanding is challenged because there is not an opposition between wrong-view and right-view as incorrect and correct truth claims but an opposition between craving and the cessation of craving. [...] The rejection of all views is not being advised, but the abandoning of craving and attachment to views. [...] The early texts do not reject knowledge, but attachment to knowledge” (Fuller, 2005, p. 8). Fuller argues in favour of what he calls the “transcendence of views,” which is a “different order of seeing” in which right view “apprehends how things are and is a remedy for craving” (Fuller, 2005, p. 157).

Buddhist parameters by synchronizing two seemingly disparate strands of Buddhist philosophy.

The second objection is more general: how could a sceptic possibly be religious in any meaningful sense? Nāgārjuna is a Buddhist philosopher and as such, one would expect his text to serve some religious purpose, such as the philosophical elucidation of religious beliefs or a defence of religious practices. A sceptical interpretation of Nāgārjuna shows that the radical programme of purging oneself of philosophical views is an interpretation of the Buddhist goal of non-attachment, perhaps just the remedy needed for intellectuals prone to grasping at theories. Nāgārjuna's philosophy is, in other words, a quietist Buddhist practice that does not rely on the ultimate acceptance of any beliefs. A quietist, sceptical Mādhyamika might even participate in Buddhist religious rituals without affirming any real beliefs about merit, karma, and so forth. This attitude would be like that of Sextus Empiricus, who says that Pyrrhonian sceptics can engage in religious rituals and be pious towards the gods without having any religious beliefs.<sup>35</sup> Many religious people would find it odd, if not offensive, to engage in a religious practice without *believing* in the tenets of that religion, but as Harald Thorsrud suggests, for Pyrrhonian sceptics, "piety is [...] reduced to certain kinds of conventional behaviour along with the relevant dispositions. Belief or lack of belief is no longer essential" (Thorsrud, 2009, p. 190).

Religious philosophers generally see scepticism about religion as a threat; if we are unable to know anything about topics such as whether God exists or whether there is an afterlife, this is seen as a problem. Rather than arguing against scepticism about religion, Nāgārjuna might say that a good Buddhist could embrace scepticism insofar as it can destroy dogmatic attachment. Contemporary philosophers such as William Alston have maintained that externalist, reliabilist accounts of knowledge answer religious scepticism by showing that theology can be an autonomous, reliable belief-forming mechanism that gives us genuine knowledge of God (Alston, 1992). Nāgārjuna, on the other hand, does not need to engage in such philosophical enterprises because his practice does not rest on knowledge claims or beliefs, but rather on the elimination of the sorts of beliefs that provide the foundation for most religions, including most forms of Buddhism.

Nāgārjuna's religiosity without belief may not work for other religions, especially those that are explicitly tied to the acceptance of a creed, but it

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<sup>35</sup> For instance, at *PH* 3.3. For a short but illuminating discussion of the Pyrrhonist attitude towards religious practice, see Thorsrud (2009, pp. 188–190). See also Annas (2011).

could work for Buddhism of a sceptical, quietist variety. Unlike fideists such as Montaigne,<sup>36</sup> Nāgārjuna has no interest in “annihilating his intellect to make room for faith” (Montaigne, 1580/1987, p. 74). Rather, he engages in philosophical destruction in order to bring about mental quietude, the absence of any faith or belief.<sup>37</sup>

## Historical Precedents

There may be historical precedents for my sort of sceptical interpretation. While agreement with some historical commentator is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for a good *philosophical* interpretation of a Buddhist text, the fact that there are some precedents for sceptical interpretations is *historically* interesting in that it demonstrates continuity with Buddhist traditions. Contemporary sceptical interpreters such as myself may be wrong, but we are not alone. Such historical precedents also help respond to the earlier objection that my interpretation of Nāgārjuna is insufficiently Buddhist.

My first example is Candrakīrti.<sup>38</sup> Recall his commentary on verse 25.24 of Nāgārjuna's *MMK*:<sup>39</sup>

That which is the pacification, or cessation, of all bases of conceptual proliferation, that is *nirvāṇa*. [...] Also, pacification of conceptual proliferation, because there is non-activity of words, is peace, because of the non-functioning of thought. (*PP*, p. 236)<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Whether Montaigne is a fideist remains a matter of interpretive dispute, but I think it makes sense of the *Apology*. See Hartle (2005) and M. A. Screech's introduction in Montaigne (1580/1987).

<sup>37</sup> For more on Sextus and Nāgārjuna on scepticism and religious belief, see Mills (2018a).

<sup>38</sup> For a more in-depth treatment of Candrakīrti's scepticism, see Dreyfus and Garfield (2011, pp. 124–130). While I ultimately disagree with their interpretation of Candrakīrti as a “Constructive Pyrrhonian” (p. 126) because it seems to me that even Candrakīrti's “constructive” tendencies are purely therapeutic, Dreyfus and Garfield make some worthwhile points about Candrakīrti, Academic Scepticism, and Pyrrhonism.

<sup>39</sup> There are also his arguments against Dignāga's epistemology and disagreement with Bhāviveka on whether Dignāga's form of reasoning is appropriate for Mādhyamikas (for instance, *PP*, p. 20; see also Bhāviveka's arguments in Bhāvaviveka, 1993). I see the purpose of these arguments as a refusal of any serious attempt at epistemology rather than any endorsement of an anti-realist, contextualist epistemology.

<sup>40</sup> *sarveśāṃ prapañcānāṃ nimitānāṃ ya upaśamo 'pravṛttis tān nirvāṇam. [...] vācāṃ apravṛtter vā prapañcōpaśamaś cittasyāpravṛtteḥ śivāḥ* (*PP*, p. 236).

This passage is an obvious example of what I am calling phase two, because it concerns the “pacification of conceptual proliferation” (*prapañcopaśama*), which is the freedom from philosophical speculation.

When Madhyamaka was transmitted to China by Kumārajīva in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, he may have brought with him a sceptical understanding of Nāgārjuna. According to Richard Robinson, Kumārajīva “rejected all notions of existent and nonexistent, while maintaining that the negation of these notions was simply a therapeutic device” (Robinson, 1967, p. 95). His student, Sengzhao, says that “the Holy Mind is void and still” and that “*Prajñā* is devoid of the marks of arising and ceasing, devoid of all marks of existing things. It has no thing that is known and no thing that it sees” (Robinson, 1967, pp. 126, 124).<sup>41</sup> Kevin Sullivan calls Kumārajīva’s attitude “religious pragmatism” because the role of emptiness is purely soteriological rather than descriptive (Sullivan, 1988, pp. 98–100). Although Kumārajīva and Sengzhao may ultimately be mystics rather than sceptics, there is at least some affinity with my sceptical interpretation in their use of philosophical negation to cultivate stillness of mind.

Perhaps the clearest historical precedents for sceptical interpretations are found in the Tibetan tradition. The *Great Digest* of the 15th-century philosopher Khedrupje contains a section refuting an opponent who claims that “the Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas have no system of their own, no belief, and nothing at all that they accept” (mKhas-grub dge-legs-dpal-bzang-po, 1992, p. 257). The opponent here is a radical sceptic, or perhaps a mystic, and Khedrupje does a thorough, Geluk job of attempting to demolish this interpretation (mKhas-grub dge-legs-dpal-bzang-po, 1992, pp. 256–272).

The clearest sceptical precedent of them all, however, is the 12th-century Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamaka philosopher Patsab Nyimadrak. Patsab, according to Dreyfus, has the following attitude:

Mādhyamikas do not have any thesis to establish, view to defend, or position to eliminate about how things really are. They merely proceed by consequences exposing the contradictions to which the views of their adversaries lead. Mādhyamikas are not in the game of demonstrating the truth or falsity of claims about how things are. (Dreyfus, 2011, p. 99)

Like Sextus, Patsab sees his philosophical practice as therapy for those under the sway of dogmatic views and aims for a tranquil mental state. As a Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika, however, Patsab’s method is not the Pyrrhonian

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<sup>41</sup> These are Robinson’s translations, or, as he calls them, “restatements”: “I furnish a periphrastic restatement in order to elucidate certain modes of meaning” (Robinson, 1967, p. 101).



method of demonstrating that two opposing theses are equal in their convincingness and unconvincingness. Rather, he uses the Prasaṅga method, which Tibetan philosophers identified with Candrakīrti in opposition to Bhāviveka's Svātantra method. In this method, Mādhyamikas demonstrate the incoherence, and hence unconvincingness, of all views on a subject.

Patsab interprets such seemingly positive Madhyamaka notions as the two truths as therapeutic devices to be used in a sceptical practice of undermining views (Dreyfus, 2011, p. 104). Unlike a mystic, he refuses to accept that emptiness itself can be an object of inference or perception, even of the "yogic" variety, because to do any of those things would be to make emptiness into an object, and this alleged "object" always disappears under analysis (Dreyfus, 2011, pp. 98–99, 104–105). Patsab is pointing out that all the Madhyamaka tropes of phase one—the two truths, dependent origination, and even emptiness itself—lead in the final analysis to what Nāgārjuna claims is the goal of Madhyamaka all along: "the abandoning of all views" (*MMK* 27.30). Patsab describes this as a state of "wisdom." However, as Dreyfus points out, "this wisdom is not a cognitively active state engaged in figuring particular objects but, rather, is the cessation of any attempt to cognize reality" (Dreyfus, 2011, p. 105). Having this complete cessation of any attempt to know or apprehend reality as his goal makes Patsab a genuine sceptic about philosophy.

This historical interlude shows that sceptical readings of Nāgārjuna may be unpopular, but they are not without basis in Buddhist traditions. This has been an uncommon reading because of the two main tendencies in the history of Buddhist philosophy, the analysis-insight tendency has been more pervasive than the sceptical, quietist tendency. Nonetheless, the sceptical, quietist tendency is a legitimate interpretation of Buddhist philosophy with a long historical pedigree.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have defended my interpretation of Nāgārjuna as a sceptic about philosophy. On this interpretation, Nāgārjuna's philosophical activity takes place in two phases: phase one, in which he seeks to support a thesis of universal emptiness and to criticize alternative views, and phase two, in which he demonstrates that the thesis of emptiness undermines itself along with all competing philosophical theories, leaving a thorough Mādhyamika in a state of the pacification of conceptual proliferation with no view, thesis, or theory at all. I then demonstrated how this interpretation can make sense

of Nāgārjuna's critiques of causation and defended the prospects for Buddhist scepticism. I discussed a few Buddhist philosophers (such as Candrakīrti, Kumārajīva, and Patsab) who developed interpretations of Nāgārjuna that are similar to mine, although this in itself does not give a sufficient reason to accept my interpretation: they could all be wrong, but at least I am in interesting company.

Nonetheless, some contemporary philosophers may feel that my interpretation has the unforgivable defect of not being philosophically interesting, since the way I paint him, Nāgārjuna turns out to be uninterested in constructive philosophy. I would point out that the label "philosophically interesting" is largely applied in line with one's personal intellectual taste. I do think, however, that my interpretation renders Nāgārjuna philosophically interesting in at least three senses. First, it allows Nāgārjuna to take his place, along with Jayarāśi and Śrīharṣa, in the Indian chapter of the history of philosophical scepticism.<sup>42</sup> This is of interest for those who would like to expand the history of philosophy to include classical Indian philosophy. Second, as a Buddhist sceptic, Nāgārjuna gives us interesting material for further inquiries into questions of the relation between scepticism and religion and whether sceptical religiosity is a viable option for people in the 21st century. Lastly, a sceptical Nāgārjuna prompts serious metaphilosophical reflections on the uses (and abuses) of philosophical practice, including, of course, interpretations of Nāgārjuna's texts themselves. What would Nāgārjuna think of contemporary scholars' vociferous debates about his work? In a Nāgārjunian spirit, I will end here lest I extend my own conceptual proliferation too far.

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<sup>42</sup> For more on Jayarāśi and Śrīharṣa, see Mills (2015a, 2015b, and 2018b).

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## Contributors

**Vincent Eltschinger** is Professor for Indian Buddhism at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, PSL Research University, Paris. His research work focuses on the religious background, the apologetic dimensions and the intellectual genealogy of late Indian Buddhist philosophy. His publications include numerous books and articles dedicated to various aspects of the Indian Buddhists' polemical interaction with orthodox Brahmanism, from Aśvaghoṣa to late Indian Buddhist epistemologists such as Śāṅkaranandana. Mention can be made of *Penser l'autorité des Écritures* (2007), *Caste and Buddhist Philosophy* (2012), *Buddhist Epistemology as Apologetics* (2014), *Self, No-Self and Salvation* (2013, with I. Ratié), and *Dharmakīrti's Theory of Exclusion* (2018, with J. Taber, M. T. Much and I. Ratié). Vincent Eltschinger, one of the editors of *Brill's Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, has been teaching at various universities, including in Budapest, Lausanne, Leiden, Leipzig, Tokyo, Venice, Vienna, and Zurich.

**Georgios T. Halkias** is Associate Professor for Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhism at the Centre of Buddhist Studies, The University of Hong Kong. His current research work focuses on the transmission of Buddhism from India and Central Asia to Tibet and on the materialities of religious exchange in the north-eastern and north-western Himalayas as part of a Collaborative Research project titled *Infrastructures of Faith: Religious Mobility on the Belt and Road* funded by the Hong Kong Research Grants Council. His publications include *Pure Lands in Asian Texts and Contexts: An Anthology* (2019), *Luminous Bliss: A Religious History of Pure Land Literature in Tibet. With an Annotated English Translation and Critical Analysis of the Orgyan-gling Gold Manuscript of the Short Sukhāvātīvyūha-Sūtra* (2013), and numerous articles dedicated to Tibetan and Himalayan Studies, and Indo-Greek Buddhism. He is the co-editor-in-chief for the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Buddhism*.

**Oren Hanner** is a research fellow at the Numata Center for Buddhist Studies, Hamburg University. He studied philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv University and holds a PhD in Buddhist Studies from Hamburg University. His research focuses on Indian and Buddhist thought, with particular interest in ethics and cross-cultural dialogue between Asian



and Western analytic philosophy. He is currently working on a book dedicated to moral agency in Vasubandhu's thought.

**Adrian Kuzminski** is an independent scholar and the author of *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism* (Lexington, 2008) and the forthcoming book *Pyrrhonian Buddhism* (Routledge). He has also written books on populism and the history of money and credit. Adrian Kuzminski has been a newspaper columnist and online political commentator; he is the founder of *Sustainable Otsego*, a social network promoting environmental practices in the Cooperstown, New York, area, where he lives with his family.

**Ethan Mills** is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, USA. He is the author of several articles on Indian scepticism as well as the book *Three Pillars of Skepticism in Classical India: Nāgārjuna, Jayarāśi, and Śrī Harṣa* (Lexington, 2018). He is co-editing a volume titled *Skepticism in India*, forthcoming from Brill. Aside from his philosophical interests, he is a cat lover and avid science fiction fan. In the online realm, Ethan Mills is a co-runner of the group blog The Indian Philosophy Blog, and he also maintains a personal blog Examined Worlds: Philosophy and Science Fiction.

**James Mark Shields** is Professor of Comparative Humanities and Asian Thought and was Inaugural Director of the Humanities Center at Bucknell University (Lewisburg, PA). Educated at McGill University (Canada), the University of Cambridge (UK), and Kyoto University (Japan), he conducts research on modern Buddhist thought, Japanese philosophy, comparative ethics, and philosophy of religion. He is author of *Critical Buddhism: Engaging with Modern Japanese Buddhist Thought* (Ashgate, 2011), *Against Harmony: Progressive and Radical Buddhism in Modern Japan* (Oxford, 2017), and co-editor of *Teaching Buddhism in the West: From the Wheel to the Web* (Routledge, 2003), *Buddhist Responses to Globalization* (Lexington, 2014), and *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics* (Oxford, 2018).

**Mark Siderits** works primarily in analytic Asian philosophy. He did his BA at the University of Hawai'i; his PhD is from Yale. He retired from Seoul National University in 2012, having previously taught at Illinois State University (1980–2008). His current research interests lie in the intersection between classical Indian philosophy on the one hand, and analytic metaphysics

and philosophy of language on the other. Among his more recent publications are *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons*, 2nd edition (Ashgate, 2015) and, together with Shōryū Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Wisdom, 2013). A collection of his papers on Buddhist philosophy, *Studies in Buddhist Philosophy*, was published by Oxford in 2016.



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Is Buddhism's attitude towards accepted forms of knowledge sceptical? Are Pyrrhonian scepticism and classical Buddhist scholasticism related in their respective applications and expressions of doubt? In what way and to what degree is Critical Buddhism an offshoot of modern scepticism? Questions such as these as well as related issues are explored in the present collection, which brings together examinations of systematic doubt in the traditions of Buddhism from a variety of perspectives. What results from the perceptive observations and profound analytical insights of the seven essays is a rich and multi-faceted picture of two families of philosophical systems—scepticism and Buddhism—that seem both akin and at odds, both related and distant at the same time.

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